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AUTHOR Quintero, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, educators understand that learners represent a complex array of personal experiences, values, and intentions that can inform curriculum development and classroom instruction. This is particularly true of the diverse population in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) and family ESL literacy programs. Educators respect and honor their learners' ways of knowing when they create and work from curricula that emerge from issues important to them. In effective family literacy programs, diverse ways of knowing are explored and valued, and it is important that learning be multi-directional: children, parents, and teachers all learn from one another by sharing experiences. Participatory techniques, such as comparing social and family values of the cultures represented in the classroom, have several benefits: they provide a forum for discussing learner knowledge; do not force participants to devalue their own cultures; and provide valuable information for teachers and their own and other cultures. Comments of adults in intergenerational literacy programs reflect these benefits. Contains a trief list of references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Valuing Diversity in the Multicultural Classroom

By Elizabeth Quintero
University of Minnesota, Duluth

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Valuing Diversity in the Multicultural Classroom

by Elizabeth Quintero
University of Minnesota, Duluth

Educators of children and adults are increasingly aware that learners within a classroom represent a complex array of personal experiences, values, and intentions that can inform curriculum development and classroom instruction. In adult English as a second language (ESL) and family ESL literacy classrooms, learners' ways of understanding and acting in the world may differ radically from those of the mainstream population. Educators respect and honor their learners' *ways of knowing* when they create and work from curricula that emerge from issues of importance to them. (See Auerbach, 1992; Nash, Cason, Rhum, McGrail, & Gomez-Sanford, 1992; and Wrigley & Guth, 1992, for discussion of programs and activities.)

However, too often teachers let their learners' knowledge and views of the world slip by unnoticed. Kingston (1977) tells a personal story about cultural knowledge that was not attended to by an elementary school teacher.

> When my second grade class did a play, the whole class went to the auditorium except the Chinese girls. The teacher, lovely and Hawaiian, should have understood about us, but instead left us behind in the classroom. Our voices were too soft or nonexistent, and our parents never signed the permission slips, anyway. They never signed anything unnecessary.... I remember telling the Hawaiian teacher, "We Chinese can't sing 'land where our fathers died'." She argued with me about politics, while I meant because of curses. (p. 194)

The Chinese families' way of knowing and speaking about ancestors was overlooked by the teacher when she did not try to learn why the Chinese girls could not sing a verse from "My Country 'Tis of Thee." The teacher's political argument was totally out of context for the Chinese children.

Robert Coles (1990) gives an example of how Hopi children's way of knowing God directly conflicted with the knowledge of their teachers and therefore was discounted by these teachers.

> Here, for example is what I eventually heard from a ten-year-old Hopi girl I'd known for almost two years: "The sky watches us and listens to us. It talks to us, and it hopes we are ready to talk back. The sky is where the God of the Anglo lives, a teacher told us. She asked where our God lives. I said, 'I don't know.' I was telling the truth! Our God is the sky, and lives wherever the sky is. Our God is the sun and the moon, too; and our God is our people, if we remember to stay here. This is where we're supposed to be, and if we leave, we lose God."
>
> [Coles asked if she had explained the above to the teacher.] "No." "Why?" "Because she thinks God is a person. If I'd told her, she'd give us that smile." "What smile?" "The smile that says to us, 'You kids are cute, but you're dumb, you're different, and you're all wrong!' " (p. 26)

As these examples suggest, when learners' ways of understanding the world are not heard and accepted, everyone loses—the learners, who bring this knowledge with them to schools; the parents, who want to pass on cultural traditions but find themselves fighting both the school information and their children's perceptions of the value of their own cultural beliefs; and the teachers, who could be opening new worlds of exploration to children and themselves while providing a bridge between the culture of the school and the culture of the home.

Multi-Directional Learning

In effective family ESL literacy programs—where literacy needs of children and their parents are addressed through instruction in English, native language literacy, cross-cultural development, self-esteem, family learning, and home school relations (Holt, 1994)— diverse ways of knowing are explored and valued. In these programs, it is especially important that learning be multi-directional: Children, parents, and teachers all learn from one another as they share their experiences.

For example, some family literacy projects use elders' storytelling as a basis for lessons. Other projects encourage children to discuss and value their cultural traditions and family routines. A teacher in a literacy program for immigrant parents and children in a rural area along the Rio Grande River in Texas used information about his learners' worlds and ways of knowing in a lesson he developed on Halloween in the United States. He provided materials and assistance in making costumes, and he compared the origins and cultural traditions of the U.S. holiday with the Day of the Dead holiday traditions in Mexico and Central America (Quintero & Macías, in press).

Uncovering Ways of Knowing

Elementary school educators and researchers have done much to inform the field about the importance of valuing families' ways of knowing. One research study shows that classroom practice can be "developed, transformed, and enriched" when researchers and teachers who have received training in interviewing techniques visit minority student households to discover the "historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being" (*Funds of Knowledge*, 1994, p. 1).

In participatory adult ESL programs, teachers conduct informal research in the classroom itself using dialogue journals, family trees, life journeys, class newspapers, and speaking and writing assignments from learners' photos (Auerbach, 1992). Designed to elicit issues and concerns of importance to learners, these activities also serve to uncover learners' ways of knowing the world.

One example of such an activity comes from a program for American Indian parents in Minnesota. Learners demonstrate the richness of their alternative knowledge by comparing parenting styles

and family values of Indian parents to those of mainstream culture. Below is an excerpt from a list of differences they developed.

Native American Indians	Anglo-Americans
1. Happiness—this is paramount. Be able to laugh at misery; life is to be enjoyed.	1. Success—generally involving status, security, wealth, and proficiency.
2. Sharing—everything belongs to others, just as Mother Earth belongs to all people.	2. Ownership—prefer to own an outhouse rather than share a mansion.
3. Tribe and extended family come first before self.	3. "Think of Number One!" Syndrome

(Richardson, in Stuecher, 1991, pp. 8-9)

Similarly, in an ESL literacy class for Southeast Asian adults, also in Minnesota, during a lesson regarding family values and childrearing practices, learners juxtaposed their views and cultural values with those of many Americans:

Asians	Americans
Asians live in time	Americans live in space
Asians like to contemplate	Americans like to act
Asians live in peace with nature	Americans like to impose their will on nature
Religion is Asians' first love	Technology is Americans' passion
Asians believe in freedom of silence	Americans believe in freedom of speech

(Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, in press)

Activities like these, which involve comparing ways of viewing and acting in the world, have several benefits: they tap and provide a forum for discussing learner knowledge; they do not force the learners to abandon or devalue their own cultures; and they provide valuable information for teachers about learners' worlds, experiences, and perceptions of American culture.

"I make myself visible..."

The benefits of respecting learners' ways of knowing can be seen in comments of parents in intergenerational programs. A Mexican woman sums up her feelings at the close of a series of family literacy classes with her daughter: "I feel content, I can help with something worthwhile" (translated from Spanish, Project FIEL, El Paso, Texas). Another writes, "I notice now that Grissel communicates more and she like to write for herself. Before, Grissel wanted me to write everything because she would say she didn't know how to write" (translated from Spanish, Project FIEL, El Paso, Texas).

An Ojibwa mother and university student in Minnesota has become a teacher and vocal advocate for her culture's way of knowing. She speaks and performs for school children, preserving, honoring, and imparting her way of understanding the world. She describes the newfound self-confidence that has changed her life:

> I am a Native American and a member from the Red Lake Indian Reservation. I'm proud of who I am and proud of what I stand for. I believe Indian people are very special people with a lot of special abilities. But there were times when being an Indian was painful. Sometimes I would wish that I could have washed off the color of my skin or changed my hair color because of all the racial remarks that I encountered. It hurt me as a person and my self-image, and self-esteem. It was difficult to go to school because I was an Indian. I think all I did was fight. Now I'm using other means to fight with. Instead of physical violence, I use methods, such as my mind. Instead of letting the anger control me and my actions, I use the anger.... I find ways to educate non-Indians, by going to my daughter's classroom and explaining about our culture. My family and I dance at schools to show the non-Indian student what the meaning of dances are about. I make myself visible instead of invisible.
>
> (Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, in press)

Conclusion

In adult ESL and ESL family literacy programs, teachers can provide cultural and linguistic bridges to connect the worlds of the home and the classroom by recognizing, honoring, and building on students' ways of looking at and understanding the world and by building curricula and classroom learning around this knowledge. As educators learn to value and build on learners' ways of knowing, learners will in turn value and benefit from the education experience of the classroom.

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